

ON TEACHING  
THE NOVEL ✕  
A PAPER READ  
BEFORE THE ✕  
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# On Teaching the Novel

JOHN D. HANEY.

WADLEIGH HIGH SCHOOL FOR GIRLS, NEW YORK.

Novel  
teaching in  
the High  
School.

As an issue of immediate and practical importance, teaching the novel means, for us, not teaching the Novel, but teaching those novels that we are called on to teach, namely *Ivanhoe*, *The Vicar of Wakefield*, *Silas Marner*, and, perhaps, *The Last of the Mohicans*. From a consideration of these, we may, of course, derive certain principles which can be said to apply with particular aptness to the novel and its method of presentation, but the title of the article is not to be interpreted, for instance, as a college professor would interpret it, if he were called upon to express his views in regard to the teaching of the novel to college students. Therefore, I shall consider the subject from the High School standpoint only, and in regard to the novels named only. I can say, however, that I think the student gets to believe that there are few good authors beside the ones she may be called on to consider, and for those who have no formal education beyond that of the High School such a conclusion is a serious disadvantage. The wit of Dickens and the satire of Thackeray are positively lost in the distance, or dwindle into insignificance in the rapid perspective that over-exaggerates the foreground occupied by Scott, Cooper, Eliot, Goldsmith, etc.

At the outset, I should like to say something about the text books. I think it is indisputable that, with few exceptions, the text books are written by the scholar from his standpoint, or are compiled by the publisher from his. I can recall only two prefaces, for instance, that from the student's point of view could be called illuminating.

Text books

One of these is Baker's in the *Midsummer Night's Dream* (Longmans, Green & Co.), and the other is Thompson's in *Burke on Conciliation* (Henry Holt & Co.). Neither of these is in a novel as you see.

The reason of this defect is very obvious. The scholar concludes that he will be judged by his erudition, and writes with one eye on his fellows to see what they are thinking of him; the publisher wants to make a book that will meet the demands of the many. But why is it, that one *Burke* (Cook; Longmans, Green & Co.) contains sixty pages of single-leaded fine-printed introduction, and eighty pages of notes, while another (Lake Classics; Scott, Foresman & Co.) contains ten pages of introduction and only fifty pages of notes, and the pages of the latter only two-thirds the size of the others? Is the student of the smaller edition to fail in her examination because she has not the words of Mr. Cook to help her through. Rather the contrary, I should say.

So much for the unduly plethoric books. And we especially should consider this point, we, who order positively the fattest books in the market, and then complain that the girls cannot stand straight. At the very outset, before we consider the text at all, we do have to consider this question of size. This aspect of the question, a purely mechanical one, may appear to some, positively absurd. But I assure you it is not so. I firmly believe that *Silas Marner* recommends itself to many readers partly because it is small enough to be swallowed and digested with ease and I know it recommends itself to me because it is small enough to be taught with ease. The most ambitious publisher cannot make *Silas Marner* much bigger than it really is. And some day there will come along a really clever man, who will write a good introduction to this book, write it with feeling, and write as though he really loved his work and thought it important, and he will have a brief message to carry to the laboring student that will edify her and impress her. And he will not concern himself overmuch with how many children George Eliot's father had or whether her

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name was Marian or Mary Ann, either. His book will be the acme of convenience and profit in novel study.<sup>1</sup>

We might stop a moment, I suppose, and ask what the novel is. If we don't ask it of ourselves somebody else may ask us. Now I know a university professor who has a course especially adapted for the proper solution of this question, and after you have studied under him a year he asks you to write a paper telling what you think the novel is, and when you read your paper he sits by and picks flaws in your definition. Hence as far as the student is concerned, the novel is *this* kind of book. (Here you may wave your hand about and indicate *Ivanhoe*, *The Vicar*, etc., as before.) I do not mean, however, that the essential difference between types of literature, such as the Essay, the Novel, and the Drama should not be clearly and definitely pointed out.

As to the definition of "novel."

These differences, however, can be taught only after the student has become, in a measure, familiar with the types, so that we shall not concern ourselves with that aspect of the question, except as it presents itself in the consideration of what the novel teaches.

What the novel teaches.

The influence of the novel can be seen very readily operating in three directions: it educates in the principles of Language, Art, and Life. Though this is a convenient division, it is not intended to imply that either language or art has no connection with life. These topics are not arranged in the order of their importance of course, but in the order in which their principles can be most readily grasped by the student.

In regard to language then, we can note its effect on the composition work of the student. It is acknowledged by Maxwell and Lewis that the imitation of certain accepted styles of writing, or the conscious effort on the part of the student to do something like what everybody acknowledges to be good, will result in a natural growth on his part at the cost of the least energy,

Effect on composition.

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<sup>1</sup>I had not then seen Hancock's *Silas Marner*; Scott, Foresman & Co.



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both his own and that of the instructor. Such imitation does not mean servitude for the imagination nor the formation of a plagiarized literary style. The principle of imitation operates throughout the child's life anyway, to a remarkable extent, and most adults can no more invent a new way of making a sentence, if it were desirable to do so, than they could invent a new and pleasing metrical arrangement. Personally I am of the opinion that this method, the imitation in sentence or paragraph of distinguished authors' manners, judiciously applied, will work the greatest benefit. (Text books useful in this connection are Maxwell's *Writing in English*, and Lewis's *Specimens of Prose Discourse*, both of which books I have used and used with profit.)

As a help in  
sentence  
structure. ✓

Among the novels, *Silas Marner* is most prolific of material for this purpose, the imitation of manner. George Eliot's sentences, sometimes long, are never obscure through involution, though they may be through philosophy, with which, however, we are not at present concerned. Her paragraphs I consider bad, in spite of the fact that someone I cannot remember says that they are astonishingly good. Macaulay is the prince of paragraphers, and the sooner we use Macaulay for a model in this matter, the sooner shall we have better moulded paragraphs. It is unfortunate that, though we dwell so much on paragraph structure in the first years of the curriculum, we have no really first-rate exemplar during those years to whom we can point as above reproach.

As a help in  
figurative  
structure.

✓ So much for sentences. Now in regard to figures—the teaching of which is peculiarly difficult in the case of the unimaginative and those unfamiliar with the subject-matter of the majority of our poetic similitudes, namely: nature. George Eliot's similes certainly impress the student with one fact, if his attention is often enough called thereto, I mean the fact that they are founded on common things; that their sources did not lie far afield in the granges of the writer's mind; and that they are impressive chiefly because they are founded on things with which even the ordinary mind is acquainted. Consider, for instance, this

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fragment of a sentence taken at random (Chap. 16): "Eppie laughing merrily, as the kitten held on with her four claws to one shoulder, like a design for a jug handle." Such a figure as that would serve for most profitable text in the matter of teaching similes—the greatest difficulty in making students exercise their ingenuity in this direction being their tendency to go too widely abroad for material.

Then again, and most obviously, the novel can provide models for description, narration, exposition, and occasionally argumentation. The descriptive passages can be used to illustrate the methods of acknowledged masters of the art, though not every novel furnishes the same amount of useful material. Thus *Silas Marner*, for instance, is almost poverty-stricken so far as providing utilizable models in description goes. The book is too introspective to offer the best matter for imitation in objective description, the only kind, as a rule, that amounts to anything in young students.

As a help in teaching types of discourse.

It might be said here, as the statement will have to be made somewhere, that the method of the novel is, on the whole, a narrative one (in which it resembles the drama) while that of the essay is expository. Hence expository writing can wait for its illustration until the essay is taken up.

The novel is amazingly helpful in assisting the student to increase her vocabulary according to a rational method. The student does not, and perhaps cannot, increase her vocabulary merely by dictionary efforts. Really to add a word to a student's vocabulary needs an operation at least as grave as that of trepanning. To attempt to sow words in a student's brain by grasping a handful of germs out of the granary of the dictionary and flinging them broadcast to a class, is as futile as to attempt to raise a full harvest on rocky soil. But the novel shows us the word in continual use, in places where it has an actual, not a potential, value, and the instructor can utilize this condition to drive home a few expressions that may help the student, drowning in the wash of ideas, to grasp

Language:  
Vocabulary.

Memoriter  
work for  
storing a  
vocabulary.

at something more than the straws of "Well, you know what I mean," or "and so forth."

For this purpose the memorization of passages by distinguished authors is a source of incalculable benefit. From every author studied something should be memorized. The fact that the author is studied is a voucher for the worth of the matter or its manner, and as for providing the student with definite ideas in regard to style, either of that very author or of any other, the method is without a peer. Take the quality of rhythm, for instance, which so many students confuse with its sister rhyme. A few memorized passages from George Eliot, who is, at her best anyway, a most rhythmical writer, will do more to teach the student what is really meant by prose rhythm than two lectures. In addition to this a rhythmical passage is easily remembered because the swing helps to carry it along. Ask any student to recall some line or half line of partly forgotten poetry and you will find in most cases that the peculiarly rhythmical line has stuck when all else has gone. The test for rhythm then, is its tendency to make words stick in the memory without conscious aid. If the student grasps that idea, he will depart with a knowledge of rhythm that nothing, not even time itself, can take from him. And prose rhythm is the very closest relative of poetical rhythm.

The notion, too, fostered by the discriminating introduction writer, that George Eliot was more or less of a pedant, steeped to her ears in Latin, may in part be eradicated by this plan. Take her characterization of Amos Barton in *Scenes from Clerical Life*:

"His very faults were middling—he was not very ungrammatical. It was not his nature to be superlative in anything; unless, indeed, he was superlatively middling, the quintessential extract of mediocrity." Is the absolute patness, the needle-like precision of that etching to be blurred by any paltry considerations that she used more Latin words than Saxon ones? If our Saxon ancestors thought that the body was a bone-vat (bān faet) or that a fugitive was a flyer-away-from



the-horde (here-flȳma) it is no reason why, when a person has broadened these ideas he should not use the most precise and exact words he can find. Our Saxon ancestors, not being introspective, failed to provide George Eliot with Saxon terms of philosophy, so she had to go to the Latin language to get them. Of course, I am not defending her style to the uttermost, but I resent the necessity for my conviction, that the deepest impression left by the writer of the introduction on the mind of the student should be a notion so entirely removed from the very great merit that her style possesses. And she *had* a style, Mr. Brownell<sup>1</sup> to the contrary, notwithstanding.

The consideration of vocabulary leads us to the question of the development of the critical faculty. I have already, (*Syllabus for First Year Study*) expressed my notion that this faculty should be developed systematically, so that on that head I have nothing further to add; but the novel does provide us with plenty of material for self-interrogation as to what is meant by the glib catch-words of criticism; it does teach us to have some notions apart from the publisher as to what the best book of the current year is.

The critical  
faculty.

I admit that it is very hard for a teacher to tell just how far to go in providing a class with notions and words to express them in the matter of criticism. This much is certain, however, that every teacher has to determine as well as he can, what ought to be done in this direction. It is positively futile for every school to try to reach the same level. The tendency undoubtedly is, to overload the student, to confuse her with plots and underplots, with objective and subjective characterization, with stationary and developing characters—though it must be confessed that some students devour this fruit with as much zest as they would the apples of Hesperides, while others make over it faces as wry as those that first laid teeth in the apples of Sodom.

The question of criticism leads us to the threshold of another one, namely, the art in the novel

Art.

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<sup>1</sup> *Victorian Prose Masters* : Chas. Scribners' Sons.

and what can be learned of it and from it. I can make myself most clear in this regard if I state at once, that I combat a position here—the position of him who goes into the art gallery and says, after he has looked at a picture: “Well, I don’t know why I like it, but I know I like it.” Mr. Bliss Perry has somewhere said that it is no small service to literature that the colleges perform, when they send into this public, to serve as leaven, men who know good work from bad, and know why they know it. *Know why they know it*, that is the point. The teacher of literature must in some sense be an artist, he must have a certain artistic reserve and rectitude, and must in some way get the artistic idea into the heads of his pupils. This I admit is difficult. In fact it seems almost farcical sometimes to attempt it. I myself, when I speak to some sections of the æsthetic beauty of *The Princess*, a poem which from its artistic side is most attractive to me, and by whose beauty I am again and again swept off my feet, am almost overcome with the apparent absurdity of my position, when I realize that I am talking to students whose knowledge may not include, and in many cases certainly does not include, a knowledge of the very elements of literary style. I have occasionally waxed eloquent, at least I tried to be eloquent, and I had rapt attention enough, over the description of Ruin in *The Princess*, and I have hung upon that line, to me so full of life and color and promise:

And Hope, a poising eagle, burns  
Above the unrisen morrow,—

only to find before me those who seemed to care nothing for life and color and promise, and to be rather surprised that I should “take on so.”

This idea of art in literature is not an idea that stands alone; it is based on the principles of beauty, and if I taught *The Princess* and did not try to teach some appreciation of the artistic element, I should feel that the students had been cheated out of something which was theirs of right, and one of the most valuable things the poem contained.

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So with the novel, though perhaps in a less evident degree. The student is entitled to insistence on this point as she is entitled to anything else in the course, even if she cannot quite cope with the abstract possibilities of the position. She should never be allowed to depart with the notion that the book itself is the only thing, and that there is nothing higher, or that there is nothing less tangible to be sought than the text. She should *seek* this grail though she never find it. It is, however, a foregone conclusion that the student never will be sufficiently impressed by such efforts in any subject alone. In every subject this artistic idea should be undercurrent, and never departed from. A good illustration of its application is found in the Pratt Institute, and a good example of its violation in the green program of the entertainment last Christmas.

Art in the  
novel.

The approach to the subject should, however, be through simpler compositions than those the student is compelled to wrestle with, at first, in the curriculum of this school. I mean to say, that the first literary works the student tries to grasp in their fulness, should be small enough to enable him to close all his fingers on them at once. In Lewis's *Specimens*, for instance, we find a text book compiled with this very idea, and the interest the students take in the work there laid out, which, I need not remind you, is laid out on principles derived from the child's point of view (and that means a world of things), is proof of the soundness of the principles, and the profit of their application.

So then, art in the novel reveals itself chiefly under two heads: plot and style. The treatment of these I cannot now expand upon, for they have been partly discussed in the consideration of subjects already mentioned.

We are now ready to take up the most important of the three branches of our discussion, the novel in its relation to life.

Life.

As the study of fiction brings us into relation with life it must be at once interesting and profitable. Deductions of a very far-reaching character can be made from this relationship, but I

shall concern myself with some of the most readily discernible. The novel should, in part, be taught so that the student may learn how to derive therefrom valuable lessons presented under the guise of entertainment; effective, in their way, unconsciously perhaps, but occasionally calling for reflection. To take a very superficial example, let us consider the eleventh chapter of *Silas Marner*, the description of the ball at Red House. I think a mere reading of this scene aloud, with proper spirit, will carry the most obvious conclusions without further effort. Certainly the half-humorous, half-ironical account of the preparations of the ladies for the festivities and of their treatment of each other, in its moral effect, is as good as, or perhaps even better than a dozen chapters from a book on etiquette. The short characterizations of Mrs. Crackenthorpe, who was:

“A small blinking woman, who fidgeted incessantly with her lace, ribbons, and gold chain, turning her head about and making subdued noises, very much like a guinea-pig that twitches its nose and soliloquizes in all company indiscriminately,” and who “now blinked and fidgeted towards the Squire, and said, ‘Oh, no—no offence’”—of the Squire, of Mr. Kimble, of the parson, and of Mr. Winthrop, are certainly equal to as many sermons on the foibles or the faults of each.

Then there is the larger consideration of the moral of the book. In *Silas Marner*, for instance, I think it by no means unprofitable to pause, and get it thoroughly well established, that Marner, at the end of the story, has changed in two ways from his condition at the beginning of it: namely, that he is willing to go once more into society (thus proving the essential fault of his original conclusion that a man is sufficient unto himself and that mingling with his fellows is a matter of individual choice); and also, that his love has grown rational (so that he actually gives Eppie the option of choosing which father she shall live with, her real or her foster parent).

It is a natural conclusion from the foregoing, that each novel must stand for some one thing above



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all others, and this is true. And that thing must be taught, too, and thoroughly taught. A class of students, led astray by the quotation on the title page and not used to the abstractions necessary to the deductions of morals, will tell you that the lesson to be learned from *Silas Marner* is the power of a little child to lead a more elderly sinner back into the paths of righteousness. But this is most superficial. George Eliot has herself told us, what is, indeed, plain enough to the adult, that *Silas Marner* represents the "remedial influences of pure, natural, human relations." And this is not the other idea put into harder words either, nor dyed in Latin for effect. Doubtless the story stands for other things, too, but this is the head they all come under. I think, among other things, the story annunciates the power of woman as against that of man. I have never heard that George Eliot really represented this position,—and, indeed, to me she appears all too ready to sneer at a sex to which she seemed to belong by mistake and to which she gave a somewhat grudging allegiance,—but, for all that, whether it was intended to be so or not, *Silas Marner* is to me a series of flail strokes on men and their morals, and that is one reason, though it may seem a queer one, why I like to teach it in a girls' school. It is not from the realization that the men make such a poor showing, but from the conviction that the women are so noble by comparison, that I get the necessary inspiration and freshness of interest to teach the story the hundredth time with something like the vivacity I may have given to it at first. The childless Nancy weeping over her dead baby's clothes, is the great character of the book; Silas himself is a poor fellow who voluntarily went wrong and stumbled back on the right path through no effort of his own.

Each novel  
stands for  
at least  
one thing.

So the *Vicar* carries its lesson of Simplicity; *Ivanhoe*, its lesson of Devotion; and the *Mohicans*, its lesson of Manliness and Self-Reliance. There simply must be some one thing that each one of these books stands for above all other things. Each is a great work by a great author, and his message



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must be there or his book would not have lasted as it has. One may be a drama of the mind, and another a drama of the body, it does not matter; in the *Mohicans*, we may snuff the very atmosphere of the woods themselves, while in *Ivanhoe* we may breathe merely the dust of the painted scenery, but for all that each book stands for some one thing and the student must not, in the crackle of exploding squibs of plot and under-plot, be allowed to escape without it.

## Style.

When the student comes to look for this thing she finds to her surprise, that she discovers the answer to the question, which has puzzled her so long, and which nobody seemed able to answer satisfactorily: namely, what is style? Style is personality: the two terms, if not interchangeable, are interdependent, and so far as literature is concerned, almost identical. As soon as she strives to imagine the kind of man that wrote the book, just then does she begin to see how it happened that the book came to be what it is. This is extremely difficult to teach, because the student, like some of her elders, is continually puzzled to know which is woods and which trees.

## Development of the novel.

We can, in this connection, consider, if we like, the question of the development of the novel. The teacher may bear in mind that the development of the individual student has been along some line that can be traced by the line that marks the development of the novel, but he need not stop to impress the student with this idea; the student would not care. The student does not care how she developed; all she cares about is that she is here now. But to found our evolution on something solid, we can go back to the very solid principle of unity. Just as the world of knowledge was developing in regard to exactness, so was the literary world. The looseness of Goldsmith in style and structure is not more characteristic of the eighteenth century than the scientific exactness and realism of George Eliot is of the nineteenth. This idea of development is so palpable, that it seems hardly worth while to point out where it gives evidence of itself.

But not alone do the novels connect with each

other, they also connect with the other texts studied. Thus, in Addison, we see the essay merging toward the story, and sometimes, indeed, dependent upon it; while in Goldsmith we see the story teller who cannot emancipate himself from the thralls of the essayist, and allows his story to tail off once or twice into considerations of prison evils and other matters in need of reform. The romance of Goldsmith provides an opening for the romance of Scott or vice versa, and we can detect and expound, if we wish, the elements of the Romance. The *Vicar* and *Silas Marner* each presents to us a child. Is there any doubt in the mind of the student, who may have, only too often, been called on to hold the baby, which is the more natural child? Not a bit. And the child in literature is almost a nineteenth century creation. The subject of nature, that we make so much of now-a-days, shows an increasing valuation as we progress from one century to another. It might be said that real estate undergoes a decided enhancement as it is handed down in fee tail from one generation of novelists to another. Where in Goldsmith will you find an out-and-out description of nature, so-called; and in what modern novel can you read a chapter and escape it? George Eliot represents, with Cooper and Scott, that phase of literary development that the student learns is so intimately connected with the careers of Burns and Wordsworth.

Correlation.

Briefly, then, questions on the novel must be based on: author's personality, on plot, on style and on the purpose of the author, so as to bring out what has been mentioned in the foregoing pages.

With these words our discussion is almost closed. I do not wish to seem to have devoted more space than was her due, to George Eliot and her work. Why I like her book ought to be evident. She is an author, strangely enough, that I almost never read for pleasure merely, but I am willing and glad to make a very profound obeisance to her art. In the discussion, it will be found, too, that I have had very little to say about methods and means. We all know why. The teacher

Summary.



has to make his own or, and this is by far the harder task, to abandon those he has made, when the occasion presents itself. I have simply tried to emphasize some of the things which to me seem of vital importance, and which do not seem to have been dwelt upon sufficiently before. I am very well aware that in the teaching of the novel, it is not the paucity of material that confronts us, but its superabundance, and that it requires a very nice sense of adjustment, and a very acute perception to know what to do and what to leave undone; to know, in other words, what is essential this time, and what may, this time, be safely left out. The one thing, however, that can never be left out, though it is very difficult always to put it in, is the personality of the teacher, who must in some sense live out or act out or represent in a vital, breathing way, the thing that his book, whatever be its subject, stands for or typifies. He must endue the characters with enough life to take them partly out of the domain of fiction and make them valued friends of every student who has followed the action through. And the Scotch Scott, with his baronial Abbotsford, his romping dogs and misty heather hills, must be *Scotch* and of the open air; the Irish Goldsmith, with his plum-colored velvet coat, his doctor's degree and his quaintness, must be *Irish* and attractively old-fashioned; the English George Eliot, with her learning, her languages and her friendships with scientists must be *English* and of an intellectual integrity that no criticism, however severe, can permanently sully; and the American Cooper, Cooper of the breezy neck-tie, with his midshipman's commission, his libel suits, his occidental freedom and sweep, must be *American*, and exhale the salty breath of the sea and the balmy air of our western forests.